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Article (Accepted Version)

Danvers, Emily (2018) Who is the critical thinker in higher education? A feminist re-thinking. Teaching in Higher Education, 23 (5). pp. 548-562. ISSN 1356-2517

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Who is the critical thinker in higher education? A feminist re-thinking.

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This work was supported by the ESRC - Grant Number 1362644.

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Abstract

Higher education's policy demands and pedagogical practices often take as their 'desirable' subject an unspecified body, failing to interrogate who the student is (and is not) in relation to differentiated access to power, privilege, and opportunity structures. This paper offers a feminist critique of such decontextualised theorisations of students and their critical thinking. Observation, focus group and interview data were collected with undergraduate social-science students at a UK university. This data revealed how students experience critical thinking as embodied, contingent and specifically gendered - with 90% of students naming a male when asked to describe a critical thinker. Consequently, this paper argues that who occupies a desirable position as a student critical thinker is not neutral or given, but intersects with students' embodied characteristics and the (increasingly divisive) socio-political context in which criticality is performed. Access to this key intellectual premium is therefore differentiated, raising questions around epistemic inclusion.

Keywords

Critical Thinking, Criticality, Feminism, Identities, Embodiment, Higher Education,

Introduction

Critical thinking refers to a diverse set of knowledge practices involving in-depth questioning and academic debate that have come to represent the intellectual mission of higher education institutions, as well as the values and attributes of university graduates. For example, UNESCO (2009) identified educating critical and ethical thinking graduates as core to the purpose of global higher education. While critical thinking is not the preserve of a specific place, it is informed by specific socio-political histories of knowledge production in 'Western' universities and has become significant as one of the defining features of the 'Western' academy (Curzon-Hobson, 2003). Consequently, the ability to think critically has become a fundamental learning outcome of higher education,

materialising in government policy, university mission statements, module handbooks, assessment briefs and marking criteria. Yet while there is a vibrant body of research (reviewed by Pithers and Soden, 2000 and collated in a special issue by Davies, 2011) exploring the diverse meanings of critical thinking and how academic staff can foster these attributes and behaviours among their students, there is a lack of work that focuses solely on students and their engagements with critical thinking.

Indeed, higher education's policy demands and pedagogical practices often take as their desirable 'critical' subject an unspecified body. Barnett (2015), in describing a pedagogy for teaching critical thinking emphasises the need for taking 'students as [whole] persons seriously' (2015, p. 65) yet his influential work fails to interrogate who the critical student is (and is not) in relation to access to power, privilege, and opportunity structures. 'Critical beings' (Barnett, 1997) remain neutral, undifferentiated bodies. Similarly, Wilson and Howitt (2016) in their research with undergraduate science students in the UK describe criticality as a 'socially emergent phenomenon' (p.3) that is closely related to students' self-identity, but these facets of identity require empirical mapping to higher education's existing inequities. This paper adds to the debate around how critical thinking practices are understood via a re-thinking of dominant theorisations of critical thinking as 'decontextualised'. It draws on feminist theorisations of Karen Barad, Sarah Ahmed and others to think with empirical data about undergraduate social-science students in the UK. Through analytical attention to who and what gets positioned as 'desirable' in relation to students and their critical thinking, questions of differentiated access and epistemic inclusion emerge.

Critical Thinking and Epistemic Inclusion

Critical thinking is closely aligned with the higher in higher education, as a set of thinking practices that, broadly defined, involve asking questions about knowledge and claims to truth. Yet, while deeply embedded in the institutional meta-language of teaching and learning in the academy, this seemingly benign and transparent intellectual value has multiple meanings and enactments. This includes the development of a rationalist approach to deconstructing knowledge as a technique for academic assessment to an ethical or activist stance that becomes aligned with students' approach to their wider lives and studies (Moore, 2011). Despite this variance, certain meanings dominate academic understanding, particularly the notion of critical thinking as a skill or technology (e.g. Fisher, 2001; Halpern, 2003; Bailin and Siegel, 2003; Paul and Elder, 2006). These approaches tend to presume a decontextualised critical 'subject' who applies a series of rational, cognitive processes to interrogate truth claims objectively - arguably obscuring the complex and contingent nature of higher education learning. Indeed, Fenwick and Edwards (2013) state that knowledge practices in higher education, such as critical thinking, are not fixed but negotiated processes sustained by 'multifarious capillaries of associations and action' of texts, materials and bodies (p.37). Where critical thinking is understood to be shaped by the social relations in which it takes place (Mitchell et al., 2004; Barnett 1997, 2015, Wilson and Howitt, 2016), there is little empirical attention to equity in terms of who the critical thinker is (and who they are *not*). In response, in Danvers (2018), I explore the pedagogical implications of re-thinking critical thinking as a contingent and embodied process, particularly highlighting the need to focus less on what critical thinking *is* and more on *what* it makes possible and excludes in particular spaces and bodies.

Yet theorising critical thinking as contingent, embodied or shaped by social relations is not aligned with current UK policy discourse. The centrality of critical thinking as a graduate outcome is stated in the introduction to the most recent higher education legislation proposal by the UK government:

The skills that great higher education provides – the ability to think critically and to assess and present evidence – last a lifetime and will be increasingly in demand.

(Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016, p. 5).

However the vocabulary of competition and choice employed in the remainder of the document reduces complex higher education processes and products (including students and their critical learning) to quantification, metrics and satisfaction scores (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016). The use of economic, rather than sociological, analysis to understand and measure teaching and learning results in scant attention being paid to the complexity of students' individual social characteristics and experiences and the impacts of this on the 'learning gains' they are able to access through their higher education participation. Indeed, a 2015 HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) report showed that the least-advantaged students (those from low socio-economic backgrounds, black and minority ethnic and disabled students) were overall less likely than their peers to complete their course, get a good degree (defined as being a 1st or 2.1), and be satisfied with their university experience. Such differential outcomes were related to multiple factors including relationships between staff and students and among students, students' social and cultural capital and, crucially here, university teaching and learning practices. Vieru (2015) argues further that such gaps are the result of the dominant, exclusive 'white, male and stale' university culture in which traditional methods of teaching and assessment, including critical thinking, privilege certain groups such as the privately educated who are more adept at learning how to 'play the game' (paras 6-7). If critical thinking is a key intellectual premium of higher education graduates, it matters if epistemic access to it is differentiated through academic culture, practices and curricula that are not inclusive.

Re-thinking the desirability of, and possibility for, 'inclusive' critical education is particularly timely given that the increased rise of populism and 'post-truth' narratives have challenged the assumption that considerations of equity no longer pose a problem. Indeed, these narratives have, ironically, occurred in parallel with persistent misogyny directed towards women in the public sphere. Two prominent examples include the sexist parodies of former US Presidential candidate Hilary Clinton legitimised by Donald Trump and his supporters, (Barrat, 2016) and the comparison of the 'shapely' legs of the female leaders of the UK and Scottish governments overshadowing important political talks (*Never mind Brexit, who won Legs-it*, Daily Mail, 2017). In the academy, Beard (2015) writes powerfully about histories of women in power politically and academically and the need to confront 'the processes and prejudices that make us not listen to *her*' (p.13). Such exclusions over being a 'legitimate' critical voice are also undoubtedly experienced more problematically and violently for black, transgender, disabled and poor bodies. Educated and/or critical voices become recognisable in specific bodies and not others through the circulation of these discourses (Ahmed, 2012). Therefore when students access the

classroom and the criticality required from them by academic teaching faculty, they do so not as neutral subjects - but as learners embedded in this particular (increasingly divisive) socio-political context.

This broader contexts filters down to everyday classroom encounters in higher education that act to (de)legitimate what constitutes 'desirable' critical thinking and critical thinkers. For example, Leathwood and Read (2009) discuss how traditional constructions of Western university students are rooted in gendered, classed, racialised and able-bodied notions of the individual subject. They argue that, despite the presence of more 'diverse' bodies in universities (and consequently the multiple possibilities for becoming a successful student), those positioned as 'Other' are likely to require more complex processes of adaption and self-regulation than, for example, white, middle-class men. In such a context, epistemic, as well as access, exclusions are likely to occur. For example, Burke (2008) describes how academic writing acts as an exclusive practice that privileges particular gendered, classed and racialised forms of knowledge and knowledge making. Similarly, Thayer-Bacon (2000) describes how the image of the critical thinker as 'a solitary figure with a furrowed brow, deep in thought' (p.17) reflects a specific paradigm of critical thinking and of the critical thinker that privileges masculine, individualised and rationalist knowledge practices in the academy, to the exclusion of critical voices deemed 'Other'. Critical and feminist scholarship has put the complexities of 'difference' on the agenda in higher education pedagogy by emphasising the notion of learning as complex, contingent, embodied and affectively located (e.g. Leathwood, & O'Connell, 2003; David & Clegg, 2008; Crossouard, 2011; Danvers, 2015). This paper's contribution is in bringing this tradition of feminist analysis to the subject of students and their critical thinking.

Researching Critical Thinking

The data from which this argument emerges, consisted of qualitative research with two cohorts of first-year undergraduates at a UK research-intensive university. These were divided into two cohorts of students – an applied social science discipline (named 'professional') and a theoretical social science (named 'academic'). Over a period of three months, I engaged in loosely structured observation of students in their weekly lectures and seminars for a compulsory module themed around academic skills development. I also interviewed 15 of these students at the beginning of their first year at university and conducted focus groups with 4 of these students at the end of that academic year. These research encounters explored how undergraduate students understood what critical thinking means, what it requires, what it makes possible, and its role in their studies, lives and futures.

The resulting data is analysed using feminist theorisations that enable a 'troubling' of the socially decontextualised and undifferentiated analyses of the critical thinker. Ahmed (2010) explores how the circulation of social norms legitimate particular bodies and voices, as well as how the micro-politics of power in higher education (2012) operate to make visible and exclude specific discourses and bodies, most often to the detriment of those already marginalised. This idea informs my claim that becoming a critical thinker is entangled within the multiple ways bodies are marked and unequally positioned in the academy and, as such, is a process that is potentially more problematic for marginalised voices and bodies. Moreover, how these ideas about critical thinkers get reproduced over time is informed by Barad's (2007) work on the apparatus. This concept speaks to how particular disciplinary or routinised practices construct a viewpoint on which to see (and

judge) specific ways of doing and embodying critical. For Barad, apparatus are not simply observing instruments but:

*Boundary-drawing practices, specific material (re)configurings of the world,
which comes to matter.*
(2007, p.140)

Using Barad, how critical thinking becomes gathered and boundaried through practices is reflected in the material conditions of possibility and impossibility of mattering, which 'enact what matters and what is excluded from mattering' (Barad, 2007, p.148). This suggests that what it means to be a critical thinker is not straightforward or transparent but instead reflects specific way(s) of seeing, and defining the boundaries of, critical thinking. The theoretical potential and problematics of using Barad and Ahmed for a feminist re-thinking of critical thinking as an affective encounter is explored in more depth in Danvers (2015). In this paper, re-thinking the critical thinker through a specifically *feminist* analysis allows both a deeper exploration of how critical thinking legitimates itself through different bodies, as well how it gets constituted through higher education's structures of power and inequality.

Who is the critical thinker in higher education?

Who occupies a legitimate position as a student critical thinker was not neutral or given, but intersected with students' embodied characteristics and the (increasingly divisive) socio-political context in which criticality was performed. This often appeared subtly in the data as students engaged in thinking critically about the entangled knowledge practices that constituted critical thinking (Fenwick and Edwards 2013). Yet certain discourses regularly surfaced - such as the insecurity many female mature students (defined by HEFCE in the UK as over the age of 21) expressed about their academic worth or how the recurrence of reference to 'elegance' presupposed a particular kind of gendered, classed and racialised academic performance. Exploring these accounts further, using Barad and Ahmed's feminist provocations, enables crucial analytical attention to what assumptions lie behind the assumed neutrality of the critical thinker.

In this section, I will explore how critical thinking emerged as 'gendered', followed by how this intersected with other aspects of identity in the recurring themes across the data of 'independent', 'confident' and 'elegant', used to describe the characteristics of a critical thinker.

Male, Pale and Stale?

Both cohorts of undergraduate students studied were numerically female dominated with 71% of the academic cohort and 75% of the professional cohort identifying as female. Yet when I asked students in the interviews how they became critical thinkers, the majority named the influence of an educated male figure. Of the ten who mentioned a person - seven said their Dad; one named a male theorist and one a male friend. Only one student, Bryony, named her Mum.

Some of this reflects global patterns of access to education whereby these students' Mums are less likely than their Dads to have university level qualifications.

Indeed, while in 2016/17 women comprised 57% of UK higher education students (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2018), in 1970 this stood at 33% and in 1980 only 36% (Office for National Statistics, 2010). This shift occurred through policy drives to widen access to higher education by 'casting the net wide' (Hinton-Smith, 2012) to previously excluded women, ethnic minorities and those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds. Yet this 'feminisation' of the academy (Leathwood & Read, 2009) has emerged alongside concerns around declining intellectual standards. For example, Hayes (2005) argues that the focus on the 'affective side of learning' (a highly gendered dichotomy) 'undermines hard critical thinking' (no-page). As Morley (2003) describes 'there is a powerful discourse of crisis, loss, damage contamination and decay in higher education' (p.5). This acts to reinforce dominant discourses of who belongs in the academy and to delegitimise these 'newer' bodies. Indeed, while more women and other previously excluded groups are numerically present, higher education remains gendered in its values and practices, including critical thinking. That 90% of students questioned in the interviews associated critical thinkers with the masculine body cannot simply be accounted for by a historic lack of women in the academy but is associated with gendered discourses about knowledge and authority. Thayer-Bacon (2000) describes how the historicised positioning of male reason versus female emotion has become inscribed in the body of the critical thinker. In such a context, emotion (and potentially the feminine), collective thinking and uncertainty are devalued in comparison to rationality (and the masculine), individual reason and an assumed clarity of argumentation. These notions emerged in the descriptions students used of their critical role models in the interviews, observations and focus groups.

For example, Kate – a mature, white female enrolled on the professional course who was the first in her family to go to university - describes some of the ways she saw a critical subject looking, speaking and behaving and how this intersected with who she thought she was (and who she might become) as a student.

He's a huge reflector, he'll always sit quietly, take everything in, churn it over, think about it and then he'll come back to you, several days later when you've completely forgotten about the conversation and he'll suddenly want to talk to you about it and he's been thinking about it. And he'll come out with more points and ask you what your feelings are on it. I think he's naturally a critical thinker – if there is such a thing - I think if anyone is, it's my Dad.

... My sister has noticed that my vocabulary has already changed; she said you already sound like a professional, coming out with more theories and ideas and questioning things...I don't want to come across as the sister who is at university who is telling her what to do. [Laughs]. Know it all Kate again! (Kate, Interview)

In the first part of the quote, Kate describes her father as embodying the 'ideal' characteristics of a critical thinker. This person she describes is something of a reflective, wise soul - a lone philosopher, seemingly unencumbered by other, domestic responsibilities as someone who simply sits and thinks. In his critical thinking, he also

appears to engage deeply with knowledge but shows emotional detachment in doing so through demonstrating considerable patience, echoing masculinist ideas about rationality and objectivity (theorised by Thayer-Bacon, 2000). In addition, this theme of detached, measured, reflection emerged as salient across the data in the observation and focus groups, where descriptions of the critical thinker stuck closely to words such as ‘*calm*’ (Carly, focus group), ‘*considered*’ (Group discussion, professional observation) and ‘*rational*’ (Group discussion, academic observation). More directly, Joseph’s claim that ‘*I cannot afford to be namby-pamby when it comes to thinking*’ (Interview) situates desirable critical thinking as being highly serious and ‘rational’ intellectual activity.

In the second part of the quote, Kate talks about becoming a critical thinker through describing the reaction of her sister. Her account specifically echoes gendered notions of feminine submissiveness in her concern about not taking up too much space (or making too much noise). Moreover, these intersect with classed concerns as a mature student from a working-class background about whether her critical voice acted as an inappropriate challenge to existing individual and social norms, particularly being seen as someone who speaks out ‘above’ her station (Hey, 2013). Kate’s account revealed how some bodies materialised more easily as ‘critical’ in Kate’s mind than others and how these classed and gendered notions informed her engagement with practices of critical thinking. This is paralleled in concerns from other students who talk about not wanting to ‘*show off*’ or be ‘*rude*’ (Camille, Interview) and the need to carefully construct themselves in specific ways in order not to be ‘*held back*’ by their gendered and racialised identity (Monique, Focus Group). Thus, Ahmed’s (2010) claim that critical authority does not discursively stick to feminised bodies resonates throughout these data.

Yet to position the critical thinker only as the ‘male, pale and stale’ (Vieru, 2015) tells a simple, binaried story. While critical knowledge discourses are historically and culturally associated with masculinity in students’ articulations, both the pedagogies and performance of critical thinking were also *simultaneously* described using characteristically ‘feminine’ traits. For example, when I asked Bryony in our interview about some of the potential barriers to criticality, she legitimates criticality as a property of the feminine body via its association with communication skills:

I don't think boys can read social situations as well as girls can, especially from a younger age. I think critical thinking and social situations are quite closely linked to each other. Like the social situations you find yourself in can be completely swayed if you have the ability to critically think, whether it be about the person or the situation.

For Bryony, a key performance indicator of critical thinking is effective communication, defined as the ability to carefully manage people, as well as to negotiate your own critical voice and behaviours. Indeed, the ability to communicate (which is also normatively classed and raced) is prized as a specifically feminised rule of the game (Leathwood and Read, 2009). This was similarly mirrored in other students’ concerns to be ‘*empathetic*’ (Tobias, Focus Group), ‘*caring*’ (Rob, Interview) and show ‘*consideration to how others might feel*’ (Bronwyn). However, the close connection of criticality with a specific element of communicative sociality draws reference to gendered (and reductive) notions of the feminine as emotional caretaker. Moreover, that these articulations took place within a

context of the teaching of critical thinking being associated with notions of soft communication skills and the production of 'caring' pseudo-pastoral pedagogical spaces is particularly significant. The symbolic positioning of critical thinking with feminised gendered subjectivities and values thus revealed a gendered dichotomy between the 'fluffy stuff' of pastoral and learning development and the delivery of tangible 'hard' knowledge.

In describing and positioning criticality as effective communication on one hand, whilst also reifying the discursive echoes of masculinist rationality on the other, this conceptually positions the feminised performance of criticality as 'smoke and mirrors' in relation to some elusive 'traditional' intellectual body. Indeed, when the ability to talk the talk becomes delegitimised as soft skills, this preserves some elusive 'genuine' critical thinking for those who do not need to become critical, but already have the prerequisites to do so. This chimes with Haraway's (1997) analysis of the subject of scientific knowledge as being a disembodied figure, such that women are deemed immodest by their body's availability and willingness, which cannot be neutralised or made invisible quite so seamlessly. This also parallels Hey and Leathwood (2009) who argue that injunction to produce the 'right' kind of higher education subject, including within teaching and learning, require 'a great deal of dispositional adjustment', particularly for those positioned as 'other' in the academy (p.111). Consequently, what it means to be a critical thinker gets read through these discursive codes that simultaneously make/unmake the critical thinker as legitimate/illegitimate along gendered lines.

Becoming a critical thinker is not separate from the multiple ways gendered bodies are unequally positioned as powerful/powerless within the academy. From the powerful echoes of masculine rationality producing these idealised critical knowers in students minds to the ways the pedagogies and practices of critical thinker are feminised and delegitimised – critical thinkers are undoubtedly *gendered*. In order to further illustrate the embodied and contingent nature critical thinking will now turn to the data 'hot spots' (MacLure, 2013) of 'confidence', 'elegance' and 'independence' as recurring themes when asking students to think about the characteristics of the critical thinker.

Elegance

The idea of critical thinking as representing a particular form of careful, polished performance captured in the word 'elegant' indicates the contingent nature of critical thinking: it is not given but articulated though classed, racialised and gendered discourses of who has the legitimacy to know and speak as critical thinkers in the academy. This is illustrated in Carly's description of learning to be critical at university:

I think you are more likely to offend...if you go in like a bull in a china shop and say 'I think this' and 'I think that'. So instead of just throwing your opinions out without any sort of education, you are learning how to say things, when to say them and where to get the information from to support you...and the whole sort of, your body language, the way that you talk, what you wear. Because everyone judges everyone, you can't help it. Whether you discriminate against them or not, you do judge people. So if I walked in here wearing a headscarf you'd think a different thing than if I was wearing a mini-skirt and a crop top. It's just

different. To know in different situations how to dress, how to speak, how to maintain eye contact.

Carly appears conscious of the need to work on herself to be recognised as a critical thinker by restraining her emotions and replacing them with patiently constructed 'elegant' language. The fear is that being offensive or misrecognised is the consequence of not knowing how to speak or be critical in the 'right' way. This sense of contingency produces physical, material and verbal cues that echo normative ideas of what a critical thinker might be like.

For example, Carly hints at the educational privilege involved in becoming critical as she strongly associates learning this new way of being and speaking with becoming a 'successful' student in higher education. She is also acutely aware of how she reproduces her criticality through her body and clothing. The specific mention of the headscarf draws on complex racialised associations around 'modesty' that reveal a postcolonial double standard of gendered and sexual morality (see Mohanty, 2003). Furthermore, Dorlin (2016) describes how the wearing of veils and headscarves is positioned as a philosophical challenge to deeply seated notions of Western citizenship as demanding persistent forms of visibility. In remaining hidden or 'modest', the headscarf is read by Carly (and others) as a challenge (or potentially a form of resistance to) forms of critical citizenship that demand an open and public performance of selfhood and critical 'voice'. Alongside this, the mini-skirt reference posits the opposition between overt female sexuality and criticality or intelligence. This draws on Haraway's (1997) work on the gendered embodiment of the scientific knower in which the masculine form possesses knowledge because of, and not in spite of, the visibility of their bodies. Carly's critical thinker's elegance is produced via a delicate balancing act of modesty/immodesty and visibility/silence.

While references to critical thinking as contingent on getting it 'right' might be expected as a learner new to the academy and its practices, what is interesting is how the critical thinker is normatively imagined. Carly's description of critical thinking as requiring embodied elegance references specific, historicised, gendered, classed and racialised understandings of the critical thinker. The thinker imagined by Carly appears to parallel Leathwood and O'Connell's (2003) ideal student as white, privileged, male and able-bodied, 'an autonomous individual unencumbered by domestic responsibilities, poverty or self-doubt' (p. 599). This figure appears elusive to, and at odds with who she is, as a young, working-class student in her first few weeks at university. This echoes Barad's (2007) notion of apparatus and how dominant images of what a critical thinker is and is not, articulated by Carly, reflect a specific way of seeing the world in which the critical thinker gets continually reimagined along normative lines. The polished performance of the 'elegant' critical thinker is contingent on specific, often narrow, discursive, material and bodily resources.

Confidence

The theme of confidence also regularly recurred in discussions about becoming a critical thinker. For example Emma, in our interview, described the link between identity, criticality and self-belief:

Because I think that everyone no matter what background or class or whatever is more than capable of it. I think certain people's belief in whether they can or their ability to are affected by their identity, definitely.

While the ability to be critical appears cognitively accessible, becoming 'confidently critical' is mediated by concerns about the authenticity of the academic knower. In order to focus in more detail on the relationship between confidence and critical thinking, I want to hone in again on one singular piece of data. In the focus group, we discussed feminist campaigner Caroline Criado-Perez and the backlash she received (included rape and death threats) after campaigning for Jane Austen to be on a UK bank note (Philipson, 2013). I asked students whether, and in what way, this shaped their thoughts about critical thinking. There was a strong awareness from the group of the material penalties for critical thinking, particularly around feminism and social justice, and how this had intensified itself through social media to produce heightened concerns around speaking out. In reflecting on how this broader socio-political context influenced critical thinking in the university classroom, Bronwyn said:

Well, I'd want to know my facts because it concerns me when I sit in things like seminars, I think I'm not confident with my answer, I don't want to say...I'm very aware of that I think. So I think I'd want to be sure that I really had looked into it and I was confident in what I was saying. Because otherwise it is going to show and it feels rubbish when you don't feel confident. So I think in the story, because I wasn't familiar with it...I can honestly tell you that I'd been completely unaware of who is on the bank notes. So I'm really uninformed of this, so it is kind of a bit hard to put an opinion when I actually don't have the knowledge behind it...It does force you to really know your stuff doesn't it?

Bronwyn worries about not being informed enough to voice her opinion and how the feared consequences of looking stupid in the classroom (or experiencing abuse like Criado-Perez) forced her to be really 'know her stuff' or else stay silent. Bronwyn expressed concerns in our earlier interview about not feeling good enough as a critical voice. This was both because of her perceived lack of academic 'kudos' due to her returning to education later in life and also because of her relationship with her domineering father who was disparaging of her abilities and reluctant to encourage her, as a working-class female, to pursue work or educational opportunities. She felt that her critical voice needed careful construction in order for it to be made public and read as legitimate within her understandings of what constituted confident and successful student-hood.

Thus becoming confidently critical is not just about adopting an unproblematic 'can do' attitude but is constructed in relation to students' previous experiences and their classed, racialised and gendered bodies, as well as in relation to what it is they are critiquing – in this case the hegemony of male power. Barad's (2007) theorisations of the performative unpack how critical voices materialise themselves to certain bodies as a consequence of the entanglement of social-material-discursive phenomena, which

produces particular optics in which certain bodies/identities are deemed legitimate/illegitimate. Indeed not all bodies feel the same need to monitor whether their critical voice is 'good enough' in the way(s) that Bronwyn describes. While my research focused on two disciplines in a single institution, those students who related their difficulties or worries about being critical to their identities most vocally were those who deemed 'Other' – mature students, BME students and those who were the first-generation in their family to attend university. This raises questions around who is recognised and included (and who is absent) within higher education's entanglement of 'critical' knowers and knowledge practices.

Independent

A final recurring theme about how to get critical thinking 'right' was the need to possess (as well as fiercely articulate) a set of independent opinions. This notion of developing opinions as valued academic capital drew on individualised understandings of the critical knower that were simultaneously entangled with classed and gendered norms. For example, Camille had considerable anxiety about the need to develop independent critical opinions:

I think I'm bringing up too much the ideas that I've been listening to... like politics for example, I have no ideas whatsoever that are mine – they are all my Dad's. That's why I'm not...into politics because I don't want to bring in my ideas, because they are not mine...because I can't argue them, because I just took them for granted. But I really don't think I am [critical] yet, I'm getting there... it's only the beginning really.

For Camille, recognising the history of her ideas then revealed the considerable affective force of having them interrupted. Whereas Camille's anxieties about her confidence in critical thinking related to her need to develop independent opinions apart from those of her educated parents who had strong left political beliefs; first-generation students such as Tobias worried that his critical voice needed to be contained within academic spaces, separate from home.

If I'm at home in a relaxed environment, I wouldn't be as, on my game, kind of, I'd probably be more passive about it.

So while Camille was sure of the need to develop a critical voice in her familial network, Tobias was less certain of where it was appropriate to use it. These classed differences appeared in mature students as well. First-generation mature students such as Jodie gave examples of where she felt confident using her critical thinking to help explain things about education to her teaching assistant Mum who she describes as '*not a critical thinker*'. Whereas Ellie, who came from a family of journalists, talks of growing up in a critical household:

Every day we had every single newspaper in my house and they'd go through and would say 'that's not right' and 'that's not right'. It was just an environment that I grew up in.

In Ellie and Camille's context - criticality was the norm in their domestic histories and they negotiated how to fit within existing critical networks; whereas for Jodie and Tobias who did not grow up around such critical 'role-models', their critical selves required further creation/translation.

It is crucial to state here that their social background does not equate to a *lack* of criticality but that certain behaviours stereotypically developed in more middle-class households (such as intellectual debate around the dinner table and articulating independent opinions) are deemed more recognisable with the performance of criticality required by higher education. Therefore, those with access to classed experiences of critical behaviours - such as engaging with argument at the dinner table with highly educated parents - may find it easier to adapt to becoming or feeling 'at home' (Ahmed, 2012, p.122) as critical voices in the academy.

Conclusion: Critical thinking, 'difference' and inclusion

Higher education's policy demands and pedagogical practices often take as their 'desirable' subject an unspecified body, failing to interrogate who the student is (and is not) in relation to differentiated access to power, privilege, and opportunity structures. However, this paper argues that being critical and doing critical is not the act of generic 'critical beings' but critical bodies located in the particularities of their social characteristics and differences and the multiple intersecting impacts of these upon their own experiences.

Students, in narrating their experiences of becoming critical in their first year at university, negotiate this through and with aspects of their embodied, intersectional identities. For example, the notion of criticality as masculinist rationality was still ever present, though this intra-acted with ideas of critical thinker as feminised emotional sociality. Moreover, the themes of elegance, confidence and independence that emerged as data hot-spots in students' descriptions of the characteristics of a critical thinker also revealed classed, aged, racialised and gendered understandings of critical knowledge and the authenticity and legitimacy of the academic knower. In addition, students' understandings of being a critical thinker are reproduced within a specific socio-political context in which discourses of whose speech gets legitimated, as well as the penalties for speaking publically, circulate and settle along differentiated lines. This is not to say that male, female, young, or mature students engaged in critical thinking in distinct and binaried ways. Instead, this paper claims that understandings of who the critical thinking *is* are not neutral, which often goes unsaid or assumed in the research literature, but come with the assumption that some bodies are a more 'natural' fit as critical thinkers than others.

Using Ahmed (2010) this is because certain affective states (e.g. the idea of someone as authoritative) 'stick' more easily to particular social objects/bodies (e.g. elite, white, males) because of their historic relations of dominance. This concurrently gets reproduced through access to differently privileged discourses and material rewards

within particular institutions. The way these ideas then get (re)produced occurs through the circulation of such optics (Barad, 2007) reproducing our imaginaries of what a critical thinker is like along normative lines. Consequently, what a critical thinker 'looks like' appears to settle more easily around traditional 'ideal' student bodies – as theorised by Leathwood and O'Connell (2003). This, in turn, means that those 'Others' may have to work harder to construct themselves as legitimate critical voices. Indeed, while my study is focused on a single institution and two disciplines, those students who related their difficulties or worries about being critical to their identities most vocally were those who were deemed 'Other' – mature students, BME students and those who were the first-generation in their family to attend university. Further research is required to explore more substantively these patterns of intersectional identity and how they map to feelings of legitimacy around becoming critical, particularly in contexts outside the UK.

This feminist re-thinking of critical thinking, difference and inclusion offers an alternative theorisation of the critical thinker as embodied and contingent. In so doing, this paper seeks to add 'critical thinking' to a body of feminist scholarship about higher education's pedagogical practices, which similarly emphasise the notion of learning as complex, contingent, embodied and affectively located (e.g. Burke, 2008 on academic writing, Crossouard, 2011 on the doctoral viva and Clegg, 2004 on independent learning). The feminist theoretical provocations employed within the paper also demonstrate how poststructuralist and new-materialist feminist thinking can be used productively together to focus deeply on the interconnections between critical thinkers and their social and institutional contexts and towards the acts of boundary making that constitute practices of criticality and what and who they include/exclude. This focus on inclusion/exclusion at the level of access to a particular 'critical' form of knowledge is crucial. Critical thinking appeared to act as a regulatory 'epistemic' discourse, providing a sense of belonging and legitimacy to students' ideas, identities and sense of belonging as university students. That students who may already be marginalised in higher education felt this sense of epistemic exclusion more keenly, is important to re-state in this particularly divisive socio-political context in which there exists particular discourses which presume that considerations of equity no longer pose a problem.

So what, if anything, can higher education institutions do to challenge or resist this direction of travel, through their teaching and learning practices? It is important to encourage the diverse student body to reimagine themselves as critical thinkers, as a political and epistemic challenge to how knowledge and criticality are reproduced along normative lines and in specific (traditional) bodies. Generating equity and inclusivity in critical thinking pedagogies involves interrogating how the critical thinker is understood and reproduced in and through higher education practices – and how this normative reproduction can be undone. Firstly, this might be about expanding definitions of critical thinking as not being fixed and stable but shifting in accordance with the social, embodied and relational contexts in which one is entangled at any particular moment (explored in more depth in Danvers, 2018). This is about disrupting certainties around who the critical thinker is, might and could be. Secondly, this means re-framing getting thinking 'right' as less of an exercise in students meeting critical learning objectives and more about interrogating the social-material-discursive conditions of possibly for *becoming* critical.

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